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ABSTRACT

The concern for the economic vitality and international standing of the United States has fueled a school reform movement focused on improving the qualities and outcomes of schooling, all of which have led to the establishment of six National Education Goals to be attained by the year 2000. Because none of the Goals addresses English language learners (ELLs) directly, this digest examines how instruction and assessment practices must improve if ELLs are to accompany their peers in meeting Goals 1-4, which include: (1) school readiness, (2) high school completion, (3) and (4) academic achievement. If all students are to achieve the ambitious National Education Goals, the following four points must be considered: student demographic trends should affect program design and instruction; all teacher preparatory programs should include information and experience in teaching ELLs; the same standards must guide the instruction of all students, including ELLs; and assessment systems must be sufficiently flexible to allow students to demonstrate academic knowledge through different linguistic modes, including oral presentations. (AB)

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

October 1993

Will the National Education Goals Improve the Progress of English Language Learners?

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(EDO-FL-94-02)

In the past decade, concern for the economic vitality and international standing of the United States has fueled a school reform movement focused on improving the quality and outcomes of schooling. This concern led to the establishment of six National Education Goals to be attained by the year 2000. The intent of the first four Goals is to take all students on a voyage to improved educational opportunity and achievements. Although students from many cultures in varying stages of learning English constitute a significant proportion of the school-aged population, none of the Goals addresses English language learners (ELLs) directly. In fact, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) reports provide only limited, inferential information regarding ELLs' progress toward meeting the Goals (NEGP, 1991, 1992, 1993). There also is a general lack of national data on the educational needs, competencies, and progress of these students. This Digest examines how instruction and assessment practices must improve if ELLs are to accompany their peers in meeting Goals 1-4.

Goal 1: School Readiness

Due to a lack of direct indicators measuring progress in Goal 1, "readiness to learn," the National Education Goals Panel recommended in its 1992 report the establishment of an Early Childhood Assessment System that would assess physical well-being and social, emotional, and motor development. In addition, the system would assess: 1) approaches toward learning with attention to "curiosity, creativity, motivation, independence, cooperativeness, interest, and persistence that enable children from all cultures to maximize their learning"; 2) language usage–"the talking, listening, scribbling, and composing that enable children to communicate effectively and express thoughts, feelings, and experiences"; and 3) cognition and general knowledge, including familiarity with problem-solving strategies, patterns and relationships, and cause and effect.

Children from all cultural backgrounds are indeed endowed with these prerequisites to learning, but those reared in different cultural settings exhibit them in a variety of ways, not all of which are consonant with the expectations of traditional schools. It is crucial that the working group currently grappling with such challenges consult experts knowledgeable about ELLs and their assessment (Prince & Lawrence, 1993).

To enhance ELLs' readiness, schools must train staff to be aware of language acquisition processes and sensitive to children's cultural backgrounds. Schools must discount the myths that young children "just pick up" languages and that exposure or immersion is all they need (McLaughlin, 1992). Any new assessment system developed for young children must take into account the unique abilities and heritages of all families and document and validate the first language capabilities of all children, so educators in the primary grades can ensure that America's schools are ready for the learners they enroll.

Goal 2: High School Completion

Goal 2 calls for the high school graduation rate to increase to at least 90%. Though inconsistent definitions blur the picture, national data suggest that for some groups of ELLs, attainment of this goal is far off. The 1993 Goals Report states that 16- to 24-year-old Hispanics born outside the United States are more than five times as likely to drop out as non Hispanics in the same age group. For Hispanics born in the United States, dropout rates are still double that of non-Hispanic groups. Better data collection systems that take language experience into account are needed, but ELLs appear to be the least well served among secondary students in regard to Goal 2.

U.S. high schools' success in increasing ELLs' graduation rates depends in part on how well they engage students who come to them with rich life experiences, extensive linguistic accomplishments, uneven academic preparation, and limited-but-developing abilities in English. Because use of a language other than English in the home appears to be related to dropping out of school (NEGP, 1993, p. 44), educators need to improve their understanding of both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of these students' experiences. Ultimately, to monitor progress toward this Goal, the array of indicators used to monitor school leaving will need to improve.

Goals 3 and 4: Academic Achievement

Goal 3 states that American students should leave Grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. Goal 4 calls for U.S. students to be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement. Efforts to clarify high standards and develop better ways of assessing students' success in reaching them have been initiated; however, instruction must also be stressed. Merely raising the cross bar will not teach a novice athlete how to pole vault better: If coaching and practice are essential to the development of athletic abilities, certainly instructional and curricular inputs are crucial to student achievement.

NEGP's 1992 report showed that American 9-year-olds compare well with their counterparts in other nations in science and math achievement. As teenagers, however, American students fall behind, and their interest and achievement in math and science never catch up. Math and science achievement for ELLs probably parallels these trends, though definitive data are not available. Some studies suggest that adequate instructional offerings in math and science typically are not open to ELLs (Minicucci & Olsen, 1992). For instance, primary indicators for Goal 4 in the 1992 and 1993 Goals Reports include the number of Advanced Placement tests

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taken and scores on them. Research has shown that programs for many ELLs do not provide access to courses that would prepare them for such tests—in any language (Pennock-Roman, 1992).

Providing instruction in ELLs' first language appears to produce gains in math and English achievement comparable to the general population, in addition to developing increasing levels of competence in the first language (Ramirez, 1992). Also, a language learner becomes proficient at social interaction before understanding complex, cognitively challenging, academic language (Cummins, 1989). While there is variation in the rate at which students acquire language, research shows they may need 5 or more years to develop cognitive academic language proficiency (Collier, 1992). In order for ELLs to fulfill their academic promise and to achieve the national goals, high quality instruction should be provided in students' first language for several years, preferably while they are learning English. Most important, they must be provided access to high quality content, including college preparatory coursework (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1993). Model programs such as Cheche Konen (Rosebery, et al., 1992), developed in Cambridge, MA, provide standards against which the quality and success of science programs for ELLs can be measured.

Interestingly, ELLs bring knowledge and abilities to schools that can help the nation achieve two of the five objectives connected to Goal 3: namely, that the percentage of students competent in more than one language will substantially increase, and that all students will be knowledgeable about the diverse cultural heritage of the nation and the world. In the 1992 and 1993 NEGP reports, a main indicator of language learning was completion of high school foreign language courses, which does not recognize the large numbers of youngsters who already know a language other than English. In assessing progress toward Goal 3, we must consider how well the linguistic competencies and wide cultural awareness that ELLs bring to schools are being preserved, enhanced, and shared among all students. Under Goal 3, it would also be appropriate to give ELLs credit for learning a foreign language—English.

Moving ELLs Toward The Education Goals: Implications

Student Demographics. We cannot help all students meet the Goals unless we know who they are, including understanding their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Demographic trends should affect program design and instruction. It is imperative that systems be put in place to collect adequate information about students' language backgrounds and educational histories, including languages in which they have been taught and the curricula of those courses.

Staff Development. The Goals assume all educators are able to prepare all students to achieve them. Although most teachers will have the privilege of teaching ELLs during their teaching careers, many do not know how to tailor instruction for this population. All educators need professional development opportunities to help them understand the backgrounds and educational needs of ELLs. All teacher preparation programs should include information and experience in teaching ELLs.

Instruction. The same standards must guide the instruction of all students, including ELLs. Studies have documented important instructional features that can help ensure the educational success of ELLs. Whatever program model is chosen, challenging academic programs need to be made available to ELLs at all levels. Research also suggests that attention to the first language is crucial to academic development (Collier, 1992; Ramirez, 1992).

Assessment Systems. While there are many measures of English proficiency that provide initial profiles of ELLs' English language abilities, the availability of appropriate academic achievement measures is inadequate. Moreover, fear of low scores too often results in ELLs being exempted from school district testing programs. Better measures of linguistic and academic competencies are needed at the local, state, and national levels (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1991). Assessment systems must be sufficiently flexible to allow students to demonstrate academic knowledge through different linguistic modes, including oral presentations. Testing that does not match the language of instruction often results in underestimation of ELLs' academic achievement. At the local level, such assessment strategies as performance and portfolio assessment need to be carefully scrutinized to ensure that they are not unfair to ELLs. Test data collected for accountability purposes should be disaggregated to show the performance of ELLs as a group. If all students are to achieve the ambitious National Education Goals, assessment systems must be refined so that all students can show what they can do.

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